

Japan Christian Activity News

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JAPANESE YMCA STAFFER COMMENTS ON VIETNAM

Early this spring, as fighting intensified in Vietnam and refugees flooded the south, the Japan National Committee of YMCA's dispatched a Japanese Y staffer to Saigon. Yoshinori Ikezumi became the second Japanese on the staff of World YMCA Services in Vietnam. The organization is directed by another long-term Y worker, Masaichi Yamashita. Ikezumi, 30, originally planned to work as a program specialist in the Delta area for one year. However, as the wheel of Indochinese history moved on its course, the volunteer service worker's plans changed. Unlike many, he neither fled the country nor was forced out by the new government on April 30. Ikezumi remained in the country until June 5. Here are some of his observations on the change in government and the reactions of the Vietnamese people. ---eds.

What is the World YMCA Services in Vietnam?

The organization is operated by the World Alliance of YMCA's and administered by the World Alliance Standing Committee on Work with Refugees and Migrants. From 1969 until recently, the director planned, organized and evaluated YMCA Services in Vietnam in the light of emergency needs and as a Vietnamese youth organization in the future.

As of April 30th we have suspended all activities and are awaiting formulation of policy by the new government. For the time being, we are gathering basic facts and information to prepare for possible future programs. The YMCA's basic understanding of the situation is that since the social system has been greatly changed, we had best wait for direction and a statement of specific policies from the authorities. Working from a socialist perspective, the Vietnamese will reconstruct their country by helping each other. They will not need foreign organizations or foreign volunteer workers as such. The logical conclusion is that the new government will find very little justification for having those foreign organizations, including the YMCA, in Vietnam. It is extremely difficult at this point to predict what kind of projects the YMCA's will be engaged in there in the future.

What was your work there?

At first I studied Vietnamese in the mornings and made afternoon trips to YMCA centers and refugee camps in Binh Duong, Phuoc Tuy and Binh Hoy Provinces. From April 1 until the fall of Saigon, I was totally occupied with emergency relief work for the mounting number of refugees in Phu Van, Binh Duong Province.

What is your candid impression of April 30?

The city (Saigon) was in a panic. The massive evacuation left total confusion; the people felt deserted by the U.S. and Vietnamese citizens who were fleeing the country. There was also an air of something inevitable approaching. . . The majority of the Liberation Army was regular North

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Vietnam (cont'd)

Vietnamese soldiers, and some of them looked very young. They were quite friendly, and as they marched in the city was infected by their calm mood, after the fear and chaos of previous hours. It was very impressive.

What is your personal observation of what took place in Vietnam?

What comes to my mind first is that the days of dependence on foreign countries are finally over for Vietnam. For generations Vietnamese have been under the domination of one foreign country after another, and they still maintained their struggle for independence and liberation. Today they seem determined to rebuild their country with their own hands. That attitude is very understandable in light of their past history. I also believe it is healthy. Consequently, we will have to radically change the meanings of such words as "relief" and "co-operation" in our relations with Vietnam.

Why did you leave the country?

My first reason for leaving is that the government requested me to do so. As far as the government is concerned, the YMCA was granted entry into Vietnam by the old regime and operated under it. It seems likely to me that, sooner or later, all organizations such as ours will be asked to leave the country. I said I was requested to leave. That's exactly how it was; we were neither ordered nor forced in any sense. I was originally booked on a special evacuation flight for foreign citizens on May 26. However, I was able to cancel it. But by the third such flight, the situation had grown more difficult and I was advised to leave by the Japanese embassy in Saigon.

Secondly, as the days went by it became more and more evident that YMCA Services in Vietnam will not be able to continue doing its former work under the new government in Vietnam. It may be pressed to re-organize dramatically. Masaichi Yamashita is still in Saigon, working with the government to arrange future projects. The final word is not yet in from him on that.

How did you find the situation of the Christian churches in Saigon after its liberation?

As I left, Sunday services were being observed by most of the Catholic churches and by the few Protestant churches which have Vietnamese ministers. On April 1 the new Government issued the "Ten-Point Policies of the PRG in the Liberated Areas," stating that the government will respect the churches and the pagodas, and recognize religious freedom. In Saigon now religious activities are neither restricted nor prohibited as long as they go along with the general policies of the new government.

One point is especially painful for Vietnamese Christians right now. Most of the foreign Protestant ministers fled the country in the midst of the evacuation chaos of late April. They gave up on the churches, they chose to forsake their Vietnamese brothers and sisters... Vietnamese Christians are highly critical now in their comments and thoughts. "What is the meaning of a mission?" they are asking.

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TRIAL OF CHURCH LEADERS CONTINUES IN SEOUL

The Rev. Kim Kwan Suk, General Secretary of the Korean National Council of Churches, and three other South Korean Protestant leaders have now been in prison for nearly four months. Currently there is no end in sight for their trial in Seoul District Court on charges of "embezzling" mission funds from the Bread For the World agency in West Germany. (see JCAN #472 dated April 18, and #476 dated June 6).

(cont'd)

TRIAL OF CHURCH LEADERS CONTINUES IN SEOUL (cont'd)

Despite earlier predictions (by a World Council team and others) that the trial would go very quickly because of a serious lack of evidence against the four ministers, a third hearing was held July 19 and a fourth is scheduled for July 25. The first two hearings were held on June 10 and July 5. Although the prosecution's case appears extremely weak, the prosecution continues to call witnesses apparently in hopes of pinning something on the four. The July 19 hearing included nearly five hours of testimony by prosecution witnesses.

Several hundred persons have jammed the courtroom for each of the hearings. Visitors report that the court, and the Park government, appear to be simply "playing" with the four men. They say the government knows the weakness of its charges, and that this is shown in the relative inexperience and youth of the judge and prosecutor assigned to the case and in the casual atmosphere of the unusually open trial.

No one is clear when this kind of legal harassment might end and the men be freed. There are many rumors in Seoul that Rev. Kim, if not all four men (the others being Rev. Park Hyung Gyu, Rev. Cho Seung Hyuk and Rev. Kwon Ho Kyung), might be released soon -- but these are only rumors.

In other church-related developments in south Korea: (1) The popular "Thursday Morning Prayer Group" has been driven underground as up to 50 government agents block entrances to the Christian Building while other agents keep Christian leaders under house arrest on Thursdays. (2) There are reports that the government might be plotting an attack on Catholics similar to the arrest and harassment of the four Protestant leaders. (3) The Korean Student Christian Federation suffered yet another in a long series of government raids on its office and arrest of its leaders in late June. And (4) William and Jean Bassinger, missionaries in Seoul, report that their home was broken into during Sunday worship and that the "thieves" overlooked watches and jewelry and took instead a variety of church-related papers addressed to the political and social situation in south Korea today.

Meanwhile, a group of Protestant and Catholic missionaries in south Korea have released a "Statement of Purpose" which includes the following commentary on the "national security" scare which President Park has exploited since the fall of Saigon:

"Without denying either the existence of the communist threat or its severity, we would make certain observations. We have recently observed the collapse of Vietnam, not because of the lack of foreign aid in finances or man-power, but because the people of Vietnam were not sufficiently inspired by a succession of totalitarian leaders to resist aggression.

"We believe that Korea's greatest asset in countering communist aggression has long been the fierce anti-communist stance of the Korean people (and especially the Christians) based on a great desire for freedom and justice. By destroying freedom and justice, by trampling on human rights, by outlawing all voices of opposition or differing opinions, the Park regime is destroying the only hope of unity and common commitment to its goals

"The goals of national security are actually dependent upon an atmosphere and genuine support of democratic freedoms and justice, but these are the very things which present government practices tend to smother out. This in itself is, in our opinion, the real threat to national security."

THE CHURCHES IN NORTH VIETNAM AND LAOS REVISITED

From June 21-28 John Nakajima made a return trip to Hanoi with two other members of the board of WCC's Fund for Reconstruction and Reconciliation in Indochina. They spent several days both before and after the trip in Vietianne, Laos. The main objective of the trip was reported elsewhere (e.g. Ecumenical Press Service, 3rd July 1975). The following is his personal observation on the church situations in both countries. --eds.

IN HANOI

On June 22 at 8 o'clock sharp, Pastor Bui Hoanh Thu began the worship service of the Hanoi Evangelical Church, just as he did last year (see JCAN No. 463 Nov. 8, '74)--with two differences. There were more men and young people than last year among the congregation of about 70. And the scripture on the embroidered banner that hangs on the altar wall has changed from "Faith without action is lifeless" to "Pray in the Spirit, Live in the Spirit, Walk in the Spirit (Rom. 8, Gal. 5)."

The text of the sermon was II Thess. 2:1-12. Quoting other passages as Matt. 24:30, Rev. 13: 7, the pastor preached on the Anti-Christ who tells lies and instigates people to sabotage their service to society and to divide people. It was an implied warning to the Vietnamese Christians in their new situation. Both this year and in the sermon I heard last year from the same preacher (Let's defend our country with the power of faith that rests upon Jesus, the Alpha and Omega.), I found a strange union of conservative Biblical interpretation and realistic nationalism.

Following the 1954 victory of Vietnam over France, many Christians fled to the south believing American tales that terrible oppressive measures would take place. However, 10,000 Protestant and 1 million Catholic Christians chose to stay in the north. By this act they cut their traditional ties with the Western churches. They engaged themselves in the national struggle to drive out all foreign powers in order to establish complete independence. While they continued to observe traditional church activities such as worship service and Sunday schools, they also believed it an unquestionable duty to participate in the national struggle.

Phenomenologically speaking, their attitude was very similar to the attitude of the Japanese Christians during World War II who positively participated in nationalistic war. Both groups joined in the fight against the big enemy - America. However, the fundamental difference lies in the fact that while the Japanese war was one of oppression, the Vietnamese war was a battle of the oppressed against an outside oppressor.

To flee following the propaganda of the oppressor meant to put oneself on that side. To stay meant to gamble on a situation where anything from liquidation to total destruction was possible. Both historically and according to the Gospel, the churches which chose to stay can be said to have taken the right direction in orienting themselves towards nationalism. However, whether this action was taken out of Christian convictions or because of their consciousness as Vietnamese is hard to say.

From listening to two sermons by the general secretary of the North Vietnam Evangelical Church and from three hours of discussion with him, I felt that their theology is still a conservative one, inherited from the Christian and Missionary Alliance. It seems inconsistent with their concept that participation in social affairs is the duty of the church. The preachers must have struggled hard to comfort and exhort their people, living in an extraordinary situation, by means of a conservatively interpreted Bible. It was natural that they should find similarities between the eschatological writings in the Bible and their own situation, but surprising with their theological background that they have been able to use these passages, not to emphasize the next world, but to call for a positive participation in this one. Some new interpretation of the Christian faith has certainly been emerging

Nakajima trip (cont'd)

from these continuous church activities during the twenty long years of war. Someday the world community will benefit from their insights.

However, there must have also been severe limitations for the 26 Protestant pastors who chose to stay in the north and whose theological training rested solely on their own mutual exchange of ideas. In the struggle to build and defend the country, there must have been many things more urgently pressing than theological development.

Pastor Thu told me that since the total liberation of the country, with the resumption of correspondence between south and north many pastors in the south have written to him, even addressing him as 'spiritual father', asking him to lead them. Reconstruction of the Vietnamese church is an important task for them.

Pastor Thu has expressed his willingness to attend the World Council Nairobi Assembly this fall. In fellowship with other churches in the world, it is certain that the Vietnamese will contribute as well as learn. What kind of church will be reconstructed, and how, in a socialist country where Christianity had never become a dominant religion? The question remains open at this point.

IN LAOS

On June 29 at 8:30 the worship service started at the Vientianne Evangelical church with some 45 adults and 15 children. I went there alone without any prior notice. I had been in this church twice before. Although attendance had decreased considerably, I was glad to find quite an unexpected number of people in the church. I had heard that the Laotian church was almost gone.

Since the February 1974 establishment of the coalition Patriotic Forces/Royalist government, Prabang, people enjoyed rather peaceful life in the cities of Vientianne and Luang, while in the countryside there still existed areas where one group dominated. The recent change of situation brought the fall of Royalist leaders, many of whom left the country.

Among several tribes composing the Laotian population, the minority Meo, capable high-landers of Chinese background, had been trained by the US military to become a special military regiment which served as a useful tool of US CIA strategy. At the sudden change in the situation, the Meo population feared a rumored massacre and fled across the border into Thailand. Now, 65% of the members of Laos Evangelical church were Meo people and 35% Lao and other minority tribes. Here began the tragedy of the church.

Many leaders of the church, including its general secretary and many pastors, are Meo. They joined their people in deserting the land of their birth. The church today is like a flock of sheep without a shepherd. Various churches helped finance construction of a new school building through WCC/CICARWS. It is beautifully completed, but nobody is there to pay the contractor, nor the schoolteachers' salaries. A very elderly Lao pastor who long ago served as the moderator of the church is now nominally taking charge of the church affairs. He murmured to me, "They did not have to go."

The preacher of the day was a young pastor of another minority tribe. He felt in danger in his northern town and wanted to flee but agreed to stay in Vientianne after persuasion by Lao Christians there. Using John 3:16-19 as the text, he began by saying, "We are like orphans after being abandoned by our leaders." But that was the only sentence in which he referred to the present situation throughout his 20-minute sermon. He went on to say, "With God we are no longer orphans; when you believe in God you are saved." It was a pure conservative evangelistic message and could have been preached in Japan, the US or Russia---the message entirely neglected the actual context of the people's situation. Here again I was seriously challenged. What type of

Nakajima trip (cont'd)

theology can really give strength to the faithful and to the church? Can the Laotian church survive?

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OLD "NEW FACE" AT NCCJ

Joining the NCC staff this month is Mr. Toshiaki Kusunoki. He will work with the Division of Mission and Service, particularly focusing on Urban Industrial Mission, International/Inter-Asia cooperation among Asian churches, and organization of work camps.

Mr. Kusunoki comes to the NCC from 1 1/2 years of work with Asian churches in California. He is expecting to interpret his experience there in a Japanese/Asian context. He replaces Mr. Isamu Sakamoto, who has left the Division of Mission and Service to study Nepalese and prepare for service in that country.

Kusunoki-san is not a total stranger at the NCCJ. He served as a secretary in the division of Service from April 1971 to September 1972. Here's his new and renewed YOROSHIKU to all our readers.

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HEADLINE-MAKING EVENTS

compiled by C. Koriyama

INDIVIDUALITY---THIS YEAR'S FASHION THEME. Clothing makers in Japan are racking their brains. What focus for the next fashion trend? From miniskirt to maxi-dress to jeans, Japanese women have adopted international fashions faster than any other women in the world. Now manufacturers can't decide what to turn out next. In Ginza, Shinjuku and Harajuku throngs of young women shop or stroll. Miniskirts, maxiskirts and jeans mingle, each woman wearing the clothes which best emphasize her own individuality. This new emphasis, men comment, makes Japanese women even more charming than before. However, manufacturers are holding their heads in despair. Uniqueness is not mass-produceable. Very bad for business.

PRIME MINISTER TAKES RIGHTIST PUNCH--Prime Minister Takeo Miki was attacked and knocked down by a right-wing opponent to his policies recently. He was slightly injured. The attack came as Miki prepared to participate in funeral services for Japan's former Prime Minister Eisaku Sato. The assailant opposes the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty which Miki has pushed the Diet to ratify this year. In the attacker's possession was a knife and a note demanding Miki's suicide.

RECESSION CONTINUES IN SHIPPING INDUSTRY--Because of world-wide overproduction of tankers, ship construction orders totaling a capacity of 25,850,000 tons have been reported canceled as of May 31. Of that amount, Japan lost over 1,000,000 tons (48 vessels) in orders.

CARS PASS POLLUTION CONTROLS--A total of 25 Japanese auto makes have passed the government's auto exhaust controls, the Ministry of Transportation disclosed recently. Toyo Industries came in first, with ten models meeting government standards. Toyota and Nissan followed with six models each, while two Mitsubishi autos and one from Honda made the lists.

INTERNATIONAL ECONOMICS SYMPOSIUM--Under the title, "The Future Direction of Japan," twelve noted economists from all over the world gathered in Tokyo June 25-27 to advise Japan on its economic future. At the symposium, sponsored by the Asahi Shimbun (Newspaper), experts concluded that, "the Japanese economy requires a net growth of five to seven percent "

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